

The Wheelers Affliction by CCflowerchild

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Summary:

It's a steady downfall. A long time ago, things had been different. It's strange, how family can be nothing more than a few people of the same blood, living under the same roof and sharing the food.

The Wheelers had not been "fine" in a long time.

The Wheelers Affliction

Author's Note:

Honestly, I don't know what this is or where it came from. Suddenly, there were 4000 words and, well, here they are.

When Mike was twelve years old, his best friend disappeared and his mother had cared. He'd been surprised by it really, because even then, when he was young and believed that his mother always would love him, the care she had for him had been overwhelming because it didn't usually happen. He remembered vividly how stiff he felt on the couch, with her loving and concerned eyes boring into his. That felt like lifetimes ago. Looking at her then, it all had felt wrong. The faux sadness in his expression when he told her, "I felt sick, " and the entire responsibility for Eleven, which he hid from her.

It was a blatant lie and it felt wrong and tainted, a sin that he would now have to swallow the guilt for, but it had been necessary and somehow those two things balanced each other out in his mind.

When he was twelve years old, he prided himself on his bravery and slickness, slipping past his parents again and again. He stole waffles from the table and candy from Holly's drawer in the living room commode, where he knew his mum hid her chocolate bars and fruity treats. The girl with the tattoo that he hid in his basement was safe and sound, his parents were none the wiser and neither was Nancy, and it had felt like a victory.

Now, years later, he knows it wasn't.

Sometimes, he wonders if his parents ever cared at all. They must have, at one point, why else would they have gotten Nancy? No one would willingly receive a child they couldn't care for, *wouldn't* care for, especially not in a town like Hawkins, where life is long and people talk. And Mike is a smart kid. So are Nancy and Holly, for that matter. And while the people of Hawkins can only speculate what goes down in the two story house by the end of the cul-de-sac, Mike takes active part in it, and he knows it's not ideal. Not even close to.

Ms Byers has that special kind of loving for her children. Will sometimes even complains about it, silently mulling over his mother's hovering and worry as they're waiting for her car to pick him up from the arcade. "I know she only means well, but it's suffocating, you know," he tells Mike in the safe five-forty-six evening sun, sitting on the pavement in front of the arcade, Dustin and Lucas' yells reaching them even outside.

Mike nodded like he understood. Admittedly, having a hovering mother sounded better than whatever he had at home, but he truly understood where Will was coming from, because he was just like that. From Wills perspective - it's just different. Worse, somehow. He sees the exaggeration waving off of him, surrounding him like a shield to protect him from the nosy voices and pitiful eyes and prodding touches.

Yes, it's different for Will. Worse.

Karen Wheeler had truly and honestly tried when he and his siblings were younger. She had loved them. And sometimes, when the wine ran out, the house is taken care of and Ted Wheeler is far away at work, that woman shines through. She forces her son to take pictures by the stairs because he is adorable in those clothes and smiles earnestly when he heaves in annoyance. Occasionally, Karen Wheeler shines through the lifeless body that took her place.

Ted Wheeler is a whole other ordeal. Nancy and Karen had given up on him entirely a long time ago and Mike had to admit that, he too, felt nothing more than apathy towards his own father and *dear god*, that is so messed up. He observes him at the stale dinner his mother forces them all to partake in. The man breathes loudly through his nose as he chews and doesn't swallow before speaking, if he speaks at all. His eyes, so similar to Mikes own, remain hollow, concentrated on his plate only, glued to his food and the fork and knife destroying it and one evening Mike just- he stops.

Caring. Trying. Associating.

His mother chews her food silently, wincing everytime her husband scrapes his cutlery against the porcelain, loud and painful in the ears and sits with Holly by her side. Holly. His baby sister. Two blonde

pigtails adorn her small head and those blue eyes are staring at him in interest, comfortable and familiar and even though she's stabbing her food blindly, weaving her fork around quite dumbly, Mike feels nothing short of love for her. Nothing short of love for his baby sister.

He turns back to the man he calls his father and still: nothing.

And then there's Nancy. Nancy Wheeler, who struck a metal chain with a random stone so hard it broke and from then on acquired her brother admiration forever, unbeknownst to both him and her. Nancy, who snuck him out of her bedroom window when he had to see Will or Dustin or Lucas after a long, hard night, with understanding in her eyes and a sad smile on her lips, putting a manicured finger to her lips.

I would never tell our parents. Not after what they've been through together.

So, when she sneaks past his bedroom way after midnight and doesn't come back until he's almost ready for school, her face wired and set into stone, he only nods towards her room, motioning her to go in before their mum comes upstairs. She always leaves by using her window, climbing through it and shutting it all the way, but Nancy isn't tall enough to reach the ledge that all; Steve Harrington, Jonathan Byers and he himself had used countless times before, so she has to come back through the basement door. Another privilege he's allowed her in the face of their trauma.

When Karen asks him if he also noticed Nancy being distant and weird he simply shrugs, looking back down to the food on his plate, tasteless and unimportant. *I would never tell our parents.*

Before all this, when Mike Wheeler was merely the brother of Nancy and Holly Wheeler and the son of Ted and Karen Wheeler, they had been a family. But now - he's not sure they are more than a few people that share the same roof and eat from the same kitchen.

After the events of that November, life moved on. Only that it moved on without him. Will grew healthier again, started gaining weight again, though the circles beneath his eyes stayed constant and clear, a hollow reminder of all that's happened to him. While Lucas and

Dustin dealt with the aftermath similarly, Mike knew they felt it too. A gap between them, all driven apart by someone that wouldn't return, at least that's what they told him. Over and over and over again until they ran breathless and Mike turned red in anger and agony and repressed tears.

Lucas dove into schoolwork, completing tasks beforehand and helping his parents more than ever, working his fingers and mind fast for as long as he possibly could, to drown the events. Dustin did the same, only that he read book after book and analysed story following story until he felt so tired that his limbs can't hold him anymore and he falls asleep on Mike's basement couch regularly.

No one mentions it.

But at least they did *something* to cope with it. What did he do? Mike buries himself into the covers and pillows of the fort in his basement, never taking it down. He calls her, every night, not even knowing if she can hear him. He cries and turns into himself, becomes angry and bitter and on the particularly bad days, wonders if he's gone crazy.

He watches his life through a haze of worthlessness, on the brink of the person he once was. He watches as his mother spends a good amount of money paying off their phone bill and makes herself feel better by talking about others, ignoring her own problems, drowning all her worries in red wine and prosecco. He watches his father, oblivious, working late to come home to a drunk wife with harsh words on her tongue that are all very true and after some feeble attempts of arguing, ignoring those right with her.

The fort reminds him of her. Mike gave her his heart, the largest, liveliest piece of himself he has to offer, which she took right with her when she disappeared. All of her, that remained in that fort, holds his most important part to give.

Karen tries to take it down for him, once.

He's almost falling asleep, eyes empty and cold, and he feels so damn tired that it's almost impossible not to. His hands hold his supercomm in a deathly grip and under certain circumstances he might have worried that he would break it, but all he is is empty.

At least, until his mother climbs down the stairs, hair freshly cut and done, skirt perfectly placed. A *perfect, nuclear family* he heard Nancy say. She'd repeated it to herself like a mantra after a particularly bad fight between their parents, one hand tugging on her short hair, an impulsive decision their father had hated, the other holding Holly's as his baby sister cried. He saw. He saw, but he didn't do anything. Simply shut his door silently and sat down on his bed, listening to their mother screaming and his father not caring enough to retaliate.

Karen Wheeler stood at the bottom of that basement for the first time in what felt like years. He sat up, scanning her expression and reading the pity, confusion and certainty on it.

"What is it, mum?" His voice wavered as he spoke and the reality almost made Mike sit up in bewilderment, the fact that he really hadn't spoken since lunch, when Dustin practically forced him to, under the watchful gazes of Lucas and Will.

Usually his mother would have left then. Today, however, she stared at her son in shock and horror and Mike knew right then and there that he should not have said anything. He should've stayed quiet, let her see his body and leave again. Because now she was taking in every inch of his face, and Mike is a smart kid, so he knows exactly what he looks like. Black hair greasy and too long for his mother's taste, surly. Brown eyes fallen, deep circles that could compete with Wills painting the pale, almost translucent skin, with an expression he'd become used to seeing on his own face: Apathy.

The food he ate tasted stale and unfamiliar, like a meal from a foreign country that you know you should like, but just don't. School seemed worthless - the work too much for his tired, strained mind and the people too shallow and rude and so damn naive, he could spit at them. It appeared to be all he all he felt these days: sadness, anger and defeat.

"I worry about you, Micheal," she said, stepping closer to him as if he was a wounded animal, one to handle with great caution so it wouldn't run away. He waits for her to say it then. Because if she says it, he can finally let it out. Let it all out. All the frustration and anger and hurt that she and his father would not see what was going on with him and hell, even with Nancy! How he didn't eat and she didn't

talk and how they were both barely home.

You can talk to me.

The same old lie that meant absolutely nothing. Not to him. Not to Nancy. Not even to their useless, nonexistent father.

Because even if he wanted to, he couldn't. He would pay the price for it, maybe die because of it. He'd signed his name onto the bottom of those papers, daggers in his eyes and fire in his bones, pressing the ink next to Nancy's careful cursive. He would never be able to talk about it, not to anyone but those who already know. Maybe that's a good thing.

"I think it might be best to take this down," she came closer again, her hand finding the cloth draped over the desk and shelf by the wall, secured by books and games and boxes, "you spend almost all your time in here nowadays."

Perhaps it was stupid. He knew she was right. Lucas had told him harshly during another fight and Dustin might have nodded along, if he remembered correctly, and even Nancy and Will had both attempted to lure him out on separate occasions, both much gentler than the rest, but one thing remained the same: he never listened to them.

"No!"

He didn't realise he was on his feet until his mother shrank away from him, eyes widened and hand void of any part of this fort. The way it should be. This fort will remain standing even if he won't, until El comes back and claims it, that's his only fucking condition and no one will take that from him, not his family or his friends or even the goddamn government if they tried.

"Mum, I- you can't!" There it was again. That waver.

Karen regained her calm, reaching forward to place a warm hand on Mike's arm. "Michael please, this is ridiculous-" but he cut her off.

"I won't take down this fort! Ground me for a week! A month! A year, for all I care, but I need this fort, do you understand?!"

He was panting. Mike Wheeler just yelled at his mother, causing her to drop his arm and look up at him with so much concern and worry in her eyes, he could touch it if he wanted to, and he was panting for all the breath he used and he wondered briefly if this is all it took to get you into hell.

He was staring down at her because that is how things worked now that he was taller than his mother, seemingly never stopped growing, every bit of pain and heartbreak and plead reflected in his eyes, and if she didn't listen to him now, she never would. He felt his hands shaking and the hot tears in his throat, a thick burn he wasn't able to swallow, and maybe his mum saw it too, because she nodded.

Karen Wheeler nodded, taking a step back and holding eye contact with her son. Her only son. Right now, it felt every bit like she was losing whatever last piece she had of him, the same way she'd lost it with Nancy. There he stood, shaking and bent.

Judging by the silence upstairs, the other members of the family were made aware of this exchange.

Maybe, a long, long time ago, Ted Wheeler would have cared enough to come see what the problem was, and Mike would have been in huge trouble. Now, things have changed.

It feels every bit like he just lost whatever he had left of himself, his old self, the one who would laugh and genuinely smile and be happy in his world, as his mother ascends the stairs and doesn't look back.

For several weeks of his life, Mike had listened to his sister cry in the bedroom next to him. He'd heard her sob into her pillows, trying to quiet them down, swallowing her screams and heavy breathing. As he contemplated helping her, hesitant because he wasn't sure exactly how he could, his own tears dried on his cheeks and turned into salt. Those nights, he stayed awake until he heard Nancy breathe raggedly and desperately, then slowly, and eventually quiet enough so that he couldn't hear her anymore even if he strained his ears. That's when he was sure she was asleep.

Those nights, he threw the blanket off himself, submerging into the cold that hangs consistent in his bedroom, placing his feet on the carpeted floor. Opening his door quietly, he glances around the

hallway for his parents and then, breathy and monotone, he pads toward Nancy's bedroom and cracks it open to see her head buried in the pillows, breathing even and deep. He chooses to ignore the picture of Barbara by her feet and the stacks of undone homework on the floor next to her bed and closes the door again.

Next, he turns to the door opposite of Nancy's, next to his parents bedroom. It's already open. Holly's blonde mess of hair sticks out from somewhere under her blanket. She's snoring softly. The room is pink and white, her bed already bigger than his was at her age, but he creeps closer anyway, grabbing the blanket that fell to the side and throwing it over her feet again, just to see her curl into it soon after.

Acknowledging his dry throat, he retrieves a glass of water. He passes the family picture of '83 hung on the wall, then the one of '84 right next to it, and wonders if there will be one next year. (Maybe it's best to ignore the voice in the back of his head telling him that's naive and childish)

He also passes his father, snoring away loudly on the La-Z-Boy. The glasses still sit on the bridge of his nose and he's still wearing his day clothes. One night, after Ted had made Holly cry, although unwillingly, and then simply chose to let Mike deal with it, Dustin had said: *Really sorry Mike, but your dad is such a loser, what an asshole.* Looking at him now, snoring in that armchair, Dustin really shouldn't have apologized. He'd been absolutely right.

He got his water and returned to bed.

Mike occasionally let's himself cry. When Nancy's with Steve and Holly and his mother are running errands, with the party already at home. His face heats up and that burning sensation returns, familiar and strong, sitting right in the center of his throat. He can tell that his vision is blurred. Those days, trapped between the sheets of papers that are his undone homework and half-assed dungeon and dragons notes, feeling that strange presence again after he'd talked into the buzzing that never returned any words, he let's himself cry.

Nothing of that compared to that night though. When his mother tried to take down the fort.

She's not coming back.

That thought is what causes him to ultimately lose it in the end.

His mother is drinking by the telephone, talking to Sara or Leone or Phoebe or Cat, but she's slurring her words and Ted is already asleep on that damn armchair and Nancy is in her room studying and he truthfully doesn't really know where Holly is, and he absolutely, completely, devastatingly loses it.

The first sob breaks him, his body in pieces shattered on the floor. There is so much pain. And finally, it overflows. Mike is clutching his stomach, hunched forward on the bed, his sob sounds far more like a scream than cry, and when it finally dissolves into all the tears he'd been holding back since that night, he hears his bedroom door slam open, but cannot bring himself to see who it is.

"Mike!" Nancy then.

His throat is burning the way it does when he's throwing up, desperate heaves for oxygen and his panicked gasps fill the room and he can hear himself, really hear himself for the first time in a very long time and dear god, when did he become this person?

He'd only known El for a week, had given her his most precious part. All his love, every last drop of love he found in him, build carefully by the people that buried their pieces in his heart, he'd devoted to them. To El, who'd been ripped away from him, sweet and pure and so powerful but just as young as him and how could they possibly deserve all this? And to Will, equally as tragic, he'd held back nothing. Nothing at all. He'd given him his love like he'd given it to Dustin and Lucas as well, holding his hands and offering him his home when his mother became too much again, his brother to careful. To Dustin, who he would have given his life for, had El not saved him, and to Lucas and Nancy and Holly and even his damned parents would they ever ask for it.

"It's okay, Mike, it's okay-" it drones on and on in his ears, his sister, holding him tightly, rocking him backwards and forwards. He's holding her just as tight. His blood runs through him painfully slow as his mind runs overdrive and it just - it doesn't stop.

It doesn't until minutes later, when exhaustion wins him over, paired with the comforting embrace of his sister.

Maybe he didn't cry loud enough for his parents to hear him from downstairs. Maybe they chose to ignore it. He had, however, cried loud enough for Holly to hear.

There his baby sister stood, hair devoid of any type of style, falling freely into her face, nose blotched and eyes red. She hugging that brown teddy Nancy had given her years ago to her chest, and when he swallows, his whole heart sinks with it, right into his stomach.

"Hi Holls," he croaks. Nancy jumps.

She loosens her grip around him and turns to see their sister standing by the door, and forces a small smile to her lips, eyes teary and heart heavy.

It's not hard to sense their sisters distress, even Mike can see it plainly, silent tears still running hotly down his cheeks, legs crammed into the small space between Nancy and the wall. He detangles himself from Nancy in one quick movement, frowning in the cold and opens his arms then. "Come 'ere."

Slowly, Holly creeps forward, across the room, into her brothers embrace. Distantly, Nancy wonders when Mike had grown this much. Not his body, though that also stood taller than hers by a longshot, but his mind and soul. Her dorky little brother, who begged her for coins for the stupid arcade and tried to repeatedly force her into a fairy costume for his little boardgame, who now brought Holly so close to his chest, the young girl almost seemed to be swallowed buy it.

"Are you okay Mikey?" Her voice was muffled by her older brothers chest, or more specifically, the thick, striped sweater that indulged him, but both her siblings had heard her. Nancy only turned towards Mike, her expression of equal sadness and pride, but Mike was looking right down at Holly, who was still pressed against him, only her head sticking out and up.

Mike nods, hesitantly. "Just a little tired."

That night, as exhaustion finally draws him into a deep slumber, Mike is pressed against Nancy, who refused to leave even after he had repeatedly insisted he was fine now. Her immensely short hair was halfway piled up, but the rest of it tickled his right shoulder. Holly was tucked between them, her feet tangled between Mike's and her head resting on Nancy's shoulder, and for the first time in a long time, Mike felt safe. Entirely safe. Not entirely happy, but at least something in between.

That morning, when Nancy was back to her normal self and Holly was again jumping around, demanding him carry her, he found it in himself to smile just a little when his mother found his gaze. Something that was not quite forgiveness, but as much as he was able and willing to give her then.

After eating at least a little, he excuses himself from the table to quickly descend down into the basement where the fort and his supercomm are waiting. He hadn't felt this light in weeks, and even if it's just for today, some of the weight had been lifted off his shoulder, just the tiniest bit.

"Hi El, it's day 307. I'm sorry for not calling earlier, but something happened last night."

Author's Note:

This is my first fanfiction, both published and for this Fandom in general, so I cannot tell you how weird this is. This sucks a little and the writing is weird but hey, at least it's up here so there's that.